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THE STRANGERS WHO BURIED HER

KYLE BARR

HE STOOD NEXT TO THE COFFIN.
It seemed so small. How old had
she been? He heard she might
have been a hooker, maybe. He
heard she was killed.

Her coffin didn't have a name.

The strangers who buried her never saw the dead girl's face.

The two strangers didn't say a word until the casket was next to the site of her grave. The grass around the grave had been removed and placed to the side so cleanly that it looked like a piece of sliced cake. The May dirt was wet, dark and crawling with worms and beetles.

"They're disgusting little shits," the older man said. He was a black man whose short grey beard was turning white. He stood far back from the edge of the undug grave, as if the hole was already dug and with another step he would fall in.

"What, what did you say," the younger stranger said. He was sweating. He was a 16-year-old much too fat for this type of work. It was uncommonly hot for spring, and they had brought the casket from the entrance, from Row A all the way to Row E when they had finally set down the casket. A circle of sweat had stained his pits.

"Huh, what did you say?"

"I hate these bugs. I hate digging in the spring."

The kid looked at him. "I'll bring the backhoe over."

The noise of the backhoe cut through the silence of the cemetery. The kid was conscious of the noise. He avoided the eyes of cemetery goers not too far away.

He left the engine running as he dropped to the ground. He walked up to the old man.

"So, uh, how does this go from here?"

The old man looked at the kid. "We dig. That's what."

The kid sighed. "Yeah, I guessed that."

The old man pushed past him and got into the driver's seat of the digger.

"Move to the side," he said. The kid barely had time to move before the old man brought the backhoe to the edge of the grave.

The kid stood there. He looked in every other direction, at the rows and rows of graves, lettered and numbered all the way to edge of the grounds. The kid had hardly visited many cemeteries. He wasn't used to the sight of so many gravestones, and he realized quickly that even lettered and numbered, they made no sense to him. There were graves marked all the way back to the early 1900s, but they lay there alongside those who had only died in the last decade. Some families were grouped together, and more often than not, their stones never looked the same, never matched. Everyone was alone in their own hole.

He stood next to the coffin. It seemed so small. How old had she been? He heard she might have been a hooker, maybe. He heard she was killed. Her coffin didn't have a name.

The old man was looking down at his controls with tight

eyes. Every movement was a sharp jerk, as if he were trying to escape some ropes that bound him to the seat of the backhoe.

"So, uh, I heard that she was young. That some guy killed her."

The old man took several seconds to reply. "She was young."

"Do you know what happened to her?"

"She died. That's what."

"And you're not curious how?"

"You gonna take a look at the body now? Is that why you took the job?"

The old man's harsh voice could be heard even above the grinding drone of the backhoe.

The old man talked as he dug. "They found her in the Bronx, and they're burying her in Jersey. What else does that tell you? If you ain't noticed, don't ya see they don't even got a stone for her? They don't want others to know how she died."

The kid stood there, silent. He felt his brain melting in the hot sun.

"I don't know any of the people buried here, and I've been doing this for too damn long. You know what I keep seeing? I've seen people buried here. They're never old. None of them ever seem to die old. We don't even got a war and the young people keep dying. Now she's gonna have worms digging through her. You think that cheap casket they put her in is gonna last?"

"Ok, ok. Let's just get her in there."

"Did you get this job for the money, kid?" the man snapped at him. His head darted between the kid and the hole. He bared his teeth. The kid sweated. "Nothing's free, yeah, but they ain't paying you a lot. So why are you here. Why'd you choose to make money digging graves? Burying kids for..."

The sound of it made the kid shiver. The shovel had scraped against something hard deep in the hole.

"Shit, shit shit shit."

The old man jumped out of his seat and stepped over to the side of the hole. He bent his back so that he stared straight down.

"Shit, it's a rock. A big goddamn rock."

The kid walked over and looked down. The old man was right. The stone was as long as his arm, and whatever dirt the backhoe scraped from it only revealed a portion of the stone. The kid couldn't even tell from where he stood if the stone lay past the boundaries of the grave.

"Looks like you get your wish, kid," the old man said,

reaching up to pull the keys out the ignition. "You get your pay without the pain."

The old man heard a thump behind him. He turned and looked down into the hole. The kid was at the bottom. He was pushing the dirt off the top of the stone.

"What the hell are you doing, kid?" the old man said, but the venom had leaked from his voice. For the first time that day, the old man sounded concerned.

The kid ignored him for a second. He was on his knees, and his long shirt was sticking to his back.

"The stone's longer than wide. I think I found the edge." The kid turned his back to the old man and started tugging at the edge of the stone. The sweat started to pool under his arms until his shirt showed layers of perspiration like the rings in a tree.

"Hey, bring the bucket of the backhoe down into the hole and bring it to the edge of the stone."

The old man did as he was told, his face was pulled back into a confused grimace.

They brought the edge of the bucket next to the stone. "Alright, now curve it. Ok, ok. Now bring it up."

The stone lifted slowly. The kid had his hands on the sides of the stone to steady it. His face sank when he saw how thick the stone was, as thick as his thigh.

"Awwww, shit..." the old man started.

"Come over here," the kid said. He tried to make it sound like a command, but his voice cracked. The old man came over to the side and kneeled down.

"I'm going to lift it up to you."

"Come on, that's not gonna happen."

"Hold onto it, and just pull."

"It's not gonna work kid."

The kid got his knees down and his fingers under the stone. It lifted a few inches off the ground. The kid was sweating buckets, and the stone scraped against the side of the hole. The old man strained back.

"Just get it over the edge, just a bit more."

They grunted, and their faces grew red. The old man hurt. He felt his back straining, like every muscle was being tied to a winch and pulled.

"The hell... you..." Then the stone was over the side. The old

The old man heard a thump behind him. He turned, and looked down into the hole. The kid was at the bottom. He was pushing at the dirt off the top of the stone.

man dodged backwards as the stone fell down onto the ground with a smack. "Pull it back," the kid yelled back up. The old man pulled it away from the hole.

The old man helped the kid up. He struggled to his feet. The sweat had made circles around his neck and arms.

"Alright, let's get the rest of it dug."

When they lowered the girl into the hole, they used a pulley and a winch. The kid said he would do it, but the old man went forward and took it in his hand.

"Do you know her name?" the kid asked.

"No. I don't know their names except for their stone, and this girl ain't got one."

"Well, I hope she died well, maybe, at the least."

"You don't die well if you die young."

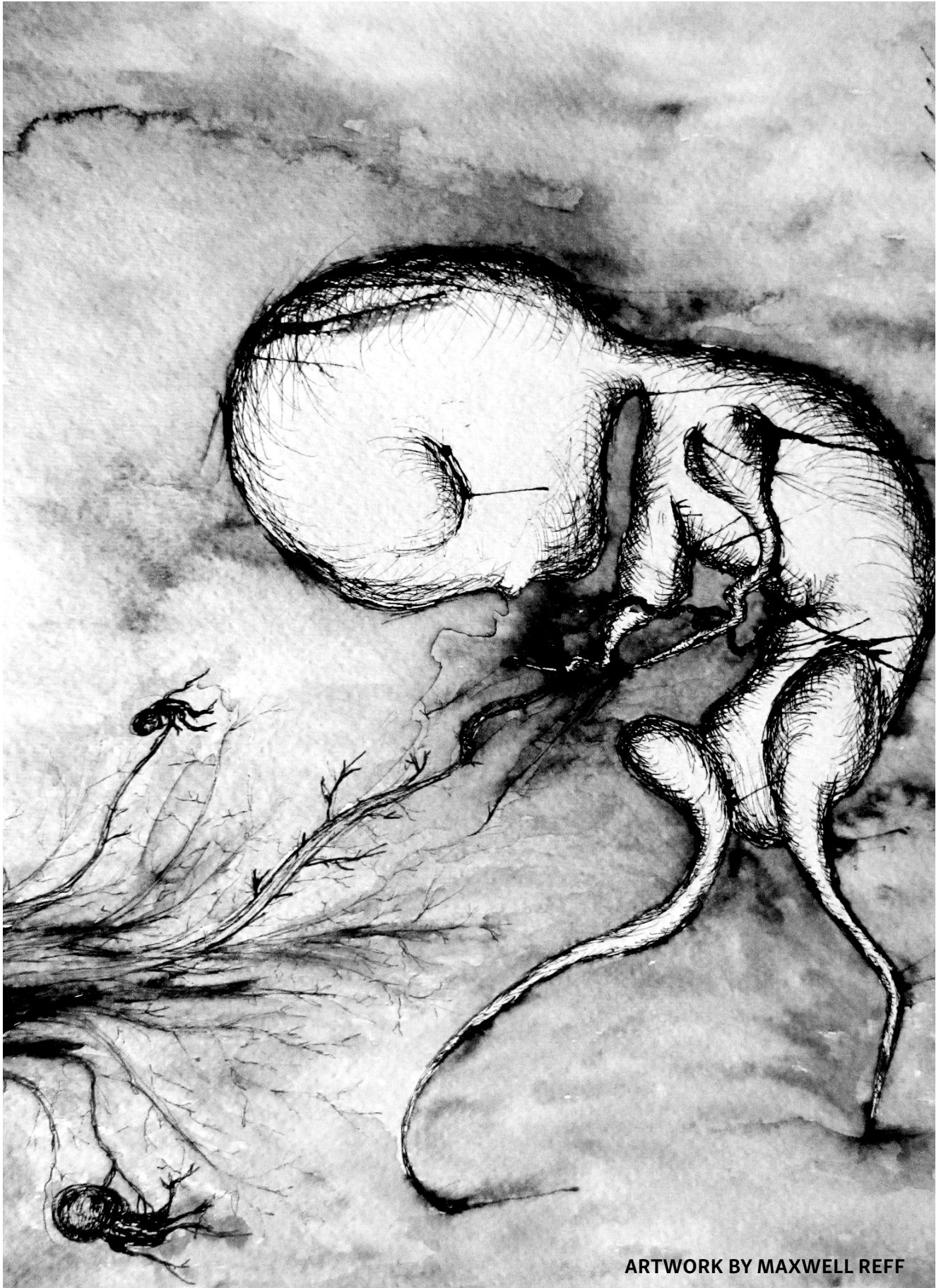
The kid looked up. "I would hope that's the same for the old as well as the young."

"If you really want, drag that stone over here. Let's just call it a blank slate."

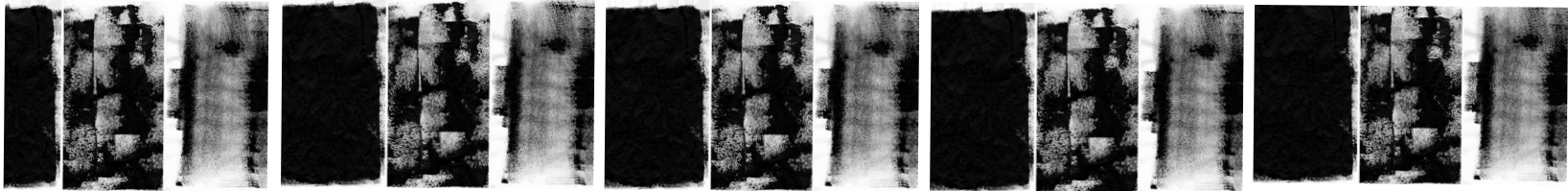
By the time they put the last of the dirt on top of the grave and rolled the grass back over the circumference of the hole, the sun had dropped low in the sky. The stone cast a deep shadow over the unknown girl's grave.

The old man smiled. "Well, I guess it's time for lunch. Give me five dollars and I'll get you a sandwich."

The kid laughed. "I guess nothin's for free, right?" The old man brought his head back and laughed at the sky. He kept walking and sang back, as if in refrain, "Yeah, nothing. Nothing no more."



ARTWORK BY MAXWELL REFF



OPPENHEIMER'S WAKE

GEORGE FARRELL



It is strange to listen to your family advocate
genocide.

"I said it thirteen years ago and I'll say it today: turn
it to glass, everything to glass, turn everything to
glass"

Trinitite, the glassy offspring of
Trinity, pollen from its roaring nuclear blossom,

Rains down

into Oppenheimer's open palm

And from his blood and bone, his palm

Splitting

A new flower grew,

Glassy petals of polychromatic death

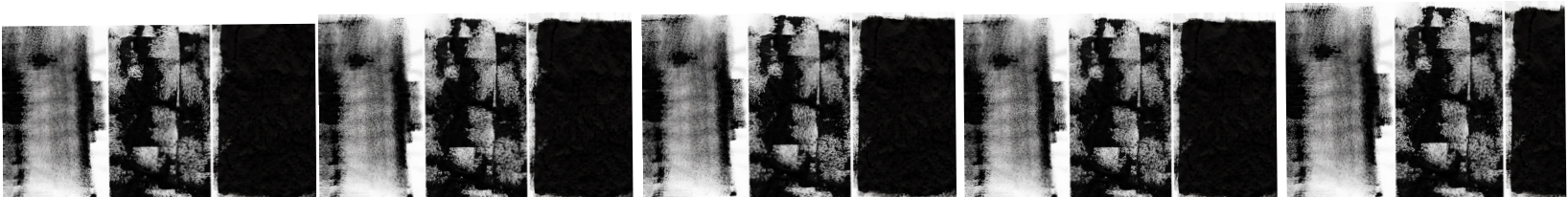
It is passed to me

Nuclear action advocated by the nuclear family

By the same people in grief of a lost grandfather

I place the flower on the casket

And walk away





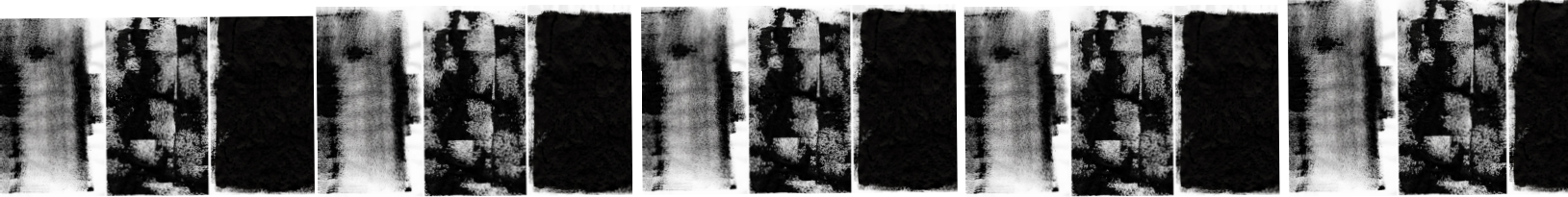
UNTITLED

CHARLIE SPITZNER

This man, this man right here, was a sterling piece of solid gold
and he was ready when he heard
his chime sound.

He knew his truth: "They knew that if they
fought us they'd get stomped out; that their skulls
would splinter and split against the patted
ground, ground that was once soft but now
lies stamped into a hardened layer
of clotted dirt from all of the
boots and dried blood, and that the thoughts in
their heads would pool around our feet and
sink into the earth for history
to swallow and keep hidden for all time."

This man died anyway, and you can
find his body heaped on the big pile,
his thoughts mixing with the others and
running off.





GALLOW'S HILL

KATHLEEN KISSANE

Rumor hung in the air, searching for a neck to land on. Shameful feet trudged through a town where mere whispers labeled you. Locked doors and shut windows could not shield you from such a swift thief. Slithering its spineless body into your most secret and personal moments, it would find you and distort your actions into crimes with a quick bend of perception. No one was free from its grasp, no one out of reach from the entangling web of deceitful lies.

Mothers, sisters, even daughters were all at the mercy of the accusing stares of “innocent” bystanders. Little girls whose faces you recognized from the play yard near the church now swung with the wind from the limbs of the tall dogwood trees. Limp and lifeless, their small bodies could not outrun gossip.

It was only a matter of time before you were woken by the sickening sound of church horses pounding against the mud as they rode up your path. Just a matter of time before it was your wrists that were

tied behind your back, almost able to touch the knife that gouged into your skin.

This time, however, rumor breaks down my door. Neighbors’ eyes cast down as they rip me from my home and throw my rigid body into the carriage, but as they drag me toward the scaffold just minutes later the people’s eyes could not be averted. They await the instant the seals on their lips could break and they could hiss laughter at my dancing body. Three silent ropes dangle from a high beam. Ascending the stairs, my knees falter only for a second under the weight of the overwhelming understanding of what is to come in the next few moments. The four hands engulfing my shoulders thrust me forward, impatient with the desperate final moments of a “proven” witch.

The faces of the judge, minister, and man who would inevitably send my body jerking down are impassive with a hint of disappointment. They act as if they were purely three men with a duty to serve their town, distraught by the deed they were

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about to take part in, but I could detect the allegation and disgust boiling right beneath the surface of their facades. I could see the devilish, twisted grins curling at their wicked lips.

I stumble towards the circular cord that would soon deprive me of any last words, and the minister's Bible becomes more scythe shaped with every fleeting footstep. Though there is no fear present in my eyes. I turn my back to the jeering audience to take the last step of my life onto the stool that would lift me up to my shattering fall. Now, higher up than any of the treacherous, distant townspeople below, I was the closest to God. They were no longer the ones who had to cast their eyes down on me.

Rumor is the noose that now suffocates me; it tightens around my neck until it is nearly impossible to swallow their betrayal. My mind is blank besides a few words I recite every Sunday that verifies where my loyalty lies. I tilt my head upwards toward the sun, searching for a savior, but I knew could not stop this hypocrisy from happening. I lower my face back to the crowd of my friends and neighbors who are shouting unrecognizable insults at my unwavering expression. Every face blurs together into the background, behind the red haze that falls over my eyes.

The devil was present today. It is not atop the gallows, but closer than they imagine.

As the man reaches for the lever, I choke on a last few thoughts. "Our father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name..." My words trail off as the crowd's taunts become increasingly more outraged. My mouth still moves with the repetition of those Biblical prayers, but to my own ears, all the noise combines into one singular hum of disorder.

When the rope snaps, before my thoughts are severed, I feel relief exude into the air. Relief that, for at least one more day, they would not be the accused. One thing becomes blatantly clear as the rest of my mind slips away: unable to peel their eyes away from this scene, they had all aided the man in pulling the lever. Each person present could claim they have a clear conscience, but the horror in their eyes convinces me they can feel the dark angel's grip constricting around their tainted, hellbound souls. Their terror paralyzed them in sin. In hopes they could save themselves, they sacrificed a guiltless woman.

So stare at my motionless figure and proclaim this was just. They cannot fool the Lord, and they certainly cannot fool the monster who now pulls the strings to their mindless bodies.



ALU-MIN-IUMMM

GEORGE FARRELL

Aluminum baseball bat. Connection.
The left temple,
Down across the eye into a mid-screaming mouth,
Scraping across the front teeth,
Cracking them.
Enamel chiclets scatter across the floor, and pink
Salivary blood drools through the gaps
In thin strands. Connection.
Back of the head, the socket where the neck meets.

Shifted discs, shattered sticks,
Broken bones,
Teeth scattered on the pavement
Reconnect, reconnect, reconnect to the socket
Mush skin and jutting bone
Bleeding holes, whole blood leaking
Piss.

Fruity flavorful cherry and banana sundae,
With broken black cookie bits,
Melting on the asphalt.

moths in orbit

fever dreams

GABRIELLE PANICCIA

Roiling images,
Tossing, wind-whipped seas—
a slick oil spill against the dark—
A vision of shadow
screaming against the light
Of stained vanes
and sullied webs.

Boiling clouds churned from smokestacks,
Nature's breath drawn from Man's iron lungs—
The moon of a streetlight
frying moths in orbit—
The eye of Sirius on the horizon:
the winglights of a plane.

Shouting behemoth, slipping back,
olive arms extended,
final cry a shout into
a mechanized buzz—
A blizzard of sawdust
swept off smooth steel.

Falling corrosion,
tapping on window panes—
Tears of an industrial Gaea,
sinking serpent-fangs of poison
through chlorophyll skins—
Liquid virus with no vaccine.

The world's
a sickened fever dream.

a sickened fever dream.

*mid-screaming
mouth*

*a blizzard of
sawdust*

*teeth scattered
on the pavement*



**SOUNDS OF THE
ORGANWOOD**

KRISTOFER BARR

ARTWORK BY MAXWELL REFF

“I was sighing into hell. My eyes sucked inwards towards the hell as I screamed and there was no sound and I saw the broken shafts of light vibrating like chords being plucked from god’s instruments. My body was one solitary organ and it was incandescent.”

The ships found the lost child stranded several feet inside the Organwood three days after my daughter’s death. The child had wandered somewhere close to the edge of the great forest, the tabooed place. They said he was just a shadow and ran off at the sight of the barge floating at the edge of the woods.

The holy rite of passage states that in our world a father’s duty is to the maintenance of his children. It is written quite clearly on the first pages with the first ink used by the first colonists of this land. The court was kind; they ruled I had cost my daughter her life, no small infraction, no small monetary investment by the colony, but it had been by negligence and not by any malicious intent. My wife was dead, had been for some time, but I had already been found sterile a short time beforehand. This itself had been a great blow to the maintenance of the colonial population. The holy writ of labor states that all men incapable of producing offspring in their latter years must be put to work in the mines and labor camps. But my left leg was bum, torn at the seams by one of the fearsome creatures that inhabit this distant land.

The holy writ of frugality states that all persons deemed useless toward lightening the financial burden the colony faced, who would only waste precious food and materials in their maintenance as a human being, should immediately be put to death.

It was a lucky stroke for me, so they said, that they had seen the child in the Organwood. The children who are called toward the Organwood are rarely, if ever, found. Sixteen of the approximate four hundred thirty-seven across fifty-nine years, and that is with many resources spent in trying to find them. My life was, after all, forfeit

to the colony, and children were precious in a land where the bad airs lead so many men and women to grow sterile.

I begged them not to send me to the Organwood. By God I begged them. My jailers beat me unconscious. I remembered little of the short time afterwards. I remembered birdsongs. I remembered the pale screech of wind as our ship skirted around the edge of the Organwood and these sounds I cherished. My face swelled and ached from the beatings, and the edges of my skin felt sharp and clammy. My left leg spasmed on the cold, hard deck of the ship like a malfunctioning compass, like it was trying to point me home but couldn’t tell where home was anymore.

They uncapped a needle and slipped the point into my neck and my world grew to silence. A single gull cawed. My eyes lulled to darkness.

I woke in a clearing somewhere deep inside the Organwood. I stared up at the thick canopy at the top of the gray-green trunks of the great trees around me. Light seemed to shy away from the leaves at the top that glistened like a halo. Streams of halfflight managed to penetrate into my clearing but the light was sick and shied away from where I lay. My lips were dry. My body reeked of sweat. The grass around me was barren, dead. My leg twinged. I tried to call out.

And there was no sound. I tried again. Air escaped my lips and there was no sound. The leaves of the Organwood’s canopy rustled above me and there was no sound. I tapped the side of my head, slapped my ears and there was no sound. I breathed rapidly, panicking and there was no sound. I rose to my knees. I screamed again and again for help and there was no sound and I twisted about, searching for a way out and finding nothing but trees I cried to myself

and still there was no sound.

My heart quivered. My leg ached like it sometimes did on humid days though the air was dry. There was a single spark at the back of the skull and I felt like I was being watched. I stood, shaking and turned at the spot, searching for whatever it was that watched me. I remembered the animal that chewed the muscle of my leg with its long, jagged teeth. I remembered the stink of its blood-odored breath. I remember the blood pumping in my ears. But there was no animal. There was no person. My balance was off. There was no sense of place in the soundless Organwood. The trees, grey-green trees with their orange canopy looked uniform. Their image swirled and grew dizzy in my mind.

In a pile of dead leaves and dead grass, a stick a quarter the size of my body had fallen. I grabbed the stick and leaned against it. I was thirsty and I tried to focus my hazy mind away from the sense that I was being stalked and toward the sight, the smell, the taste of water. I used the stick as my crutch to balance against my bum left leg and I left the clearing to follow deeper into the Organwood.

I stumbled for miles. There were no bearings I could make in the Organwood. The sun refracted through the thick canopy. The sun didn't seem to move. The day drew on timelessly. The last time I had been so thirsty was when I had been attacked by the animal. I wished I had a drink. My drink of choice: rye whiskey. Whiskey was the flood that drowned the ache of my missing parts. On cold days the whiskey tasted like woodsmoke. On the warm days it tasted like rain.

It never rained on the Organwood. The sky shone on the place. They said the Organwood called out to children in their dreams. They said it was the honey in their medicine of sleep. Parents sometimes tried to keep their children from deeper sleep, afraid of the call of the Organwood, afraid of losing their chance to escape the labor camps. They were too important. You could tell when a child in the colony was being kept from sleep. They didn't play with the other children in the churchyard. They tilted in the wind like a flower. They drifted about the colony half-dead. My parents had allowed me sleep. The Organwood never called to me, though, like everyone, I was always afraid of it.

It was a forest. There had to be water, I told myself. I could feel the slightest breeze brush past the hair on my head and arms and I followed that wind. There were no other options. The paths I danced around the trees all looked the same. And still there was no water. I tried to lick the ground and the soil there was as dry as my lips and I cried then and there were

no tears I was so thirsty and there was no sound.

I could not tell how long I had been walking when the ache in my left leg turned to flame and I fell to the ground. I looked down at my leg as its missing muscle spasmed and gasped silent in the Organwood and the flame that started there reached out licking across to my other leg and my torso, my arms, my lips. It was a silent fire, a pain worse than my worst of nights huddled with my drink in my home as the pain in my leg blazed. I was sighing into hell. My eyes sucked inwards toward the hell as I screamed and there was no sound and I saw the broken shafts of light vibrating like chords being plucked from god's instruments. My body was one solitary organ and it was incandescent.

And then all at once the pain stopped and the light ceased to vibrate. I breathed with lungs that felt no more pain and made no sound and I cried in relief and there was no sound. But as I reached my arm for the comfort of my stick I could not feel it. I looked over to my hand brushing against the long piece of wood. I could see it, but I could not feel it. I could not feel my legs or my arms. I saw my chest rise and fall but I could not feel the air move in me. It was more than numbness. It was deadness. And again I screamed and there was no sound.

I no longer felt thirsty, and I thanked God for that. And I cursed God for taking thirst from me. I remembered the long days I sat in my church and begged God for an end to the pain in my leg. I remembered the sounds of the church organ droning against the backdrop of my buzzing pain. I cursed God then when I didn't hear him answer and in the Organwood lying there I asked God's forgiveness. God was cruel and evil and he hated me. God hated me for losing my daughter. I hated God for that. I hated myself for hating God. I hated myself for failing her.

I could not walk anymore. I could not feel my steps or my muscles as they moved. Instead I crawled around the floor of the Organwood. I watched as I moved my arms. I saw the gray-green torsos of the Organwood's trees move past me. The only thing I felt was still the small ember in my brain that made me twist my head at every perceived movement of the Organwood. The image of the animal's jaws that wounded me returned again and again and my vision clouded with constant panic.

The colonists, the holy governing body. It would have been more a mercy if they had executed me, if they had tied my legs to an anchor and sent my body to the ocean to die with my senses choked in water. Drowning could not possibly be

...and there was no sound.

as bad as this. My wife had died in her sleep as they said from an acute case of melancholia.

My daughter couldn't possibly blame me. It was not my fault. She could look down on me from where her soul has journeyed on but I hoped it was not with condemnation but pity. She could not blame me for my love of the drink. She was so young but she understood what the pain was like, how I couldn't control it. She could forgive me for worrying over her, for keeping her up at night so the sounds of the Organwood did not dance across her sweet, pouting lips and into her brain. She could forgive me that.

I almost knew it would come. I had time enough to predict it, sliding against the ground of the half-lit Organwood like a skulking animal that made no sound. I could have predicted my sight would go as well. It wasn't painful and for that I was grateful. It was as if I had just closed my eyes to dream and kept them closed. I was awake, yes. I could think, and that was the only thing I had anymore. I knew I could wait for the thing that was stalking me, the animal or the child I had nearly forgotten about in my fear. I would wait for them to find me, to take me. I knew I wouldn't feel it. Just like my daughter who fell asleep in her bath while I sat dozing in the bottle at our kitchen table. She just sunk off into dream and she flowed there in the water. I only found her the next morning, and I couldn't breathe and for once the pain in my leg was replaced by a different pain, her little face placid as the water in the bath washed over her, soundless.

A single string was plucked, or rather not a string. It was sound, sound in the darkness of my waking dream. It was a note, a deep note that echoed in the halls of my closeted mind. It was a sound like a church organ singing. Its volume shook unabating, like one sonorous pipe. It was as if I could see it, see the vibrations of the sound and it came from one of the trees in the Organwood. I could see it. I could see. It was a tree next to me and it was singing. It was singing to God.

I moved what I thought must have been my body because the tree and the sound drew nearer to me until I was pressed up against the sound, the only sound. And as I did more sounds erupted from the trees around me like the pipes of the organ, larger and shorter, higher and lower, all of them combining to form a song. It was a song that spoke of the iron in the earth, the grass in the heavens. The music swayed and undulated in my skin. And when all the trees in the Organwood had opened up their music to me, their church, only then could I hear the voices of the ones we thought we had lost. It started with the child, the newest of the group, who had followed me all this

time, waiting for me to lose the bonds that held me to the colony and to my life before. The child started to sing, sliding up against the sounds of the Organwood and mingling with them. The children's choir arose and twisted the air inside me, high and higher than the bass and treble notes.

I saw the halo of fire as the sun danced across the edges of the Organwood. I saw it announced like a wave of sound. It was an eruption in me, fire like the heat from bubbling earth and it was sound. It was sound. It was sound and when I could no longer take it I opened my mouth and I sang with it. I was a part of the sound, my body, my holy writ to protect our children. I reached out and touched the hand of my daughter who floated through the oceans at the end of the world and there I kissed her goodnight. I joined my voice to the others as they echoed in the dreams of other children. Dreams that sang to come and join the voices here. In the Organwood, we sang, you can be free. In the Organwood, we sang, you can dream.



ARTWORK BY ADAM INZALACO

THE RIFT

JACK CONTE

Tonight started out much like any other Halloween night: hanging out with the squad, looking to get into some mischief. Sometimes we'll go to a fake haunted house, admire the aesthetic, and just laugh at little kids because we're too desensitized to get startled by the aunt-Margie's-lipstick-clowns and Mom-bought-this-felt-for-half-off-at-the-fabric-store-werewolves. Other years we would do our own spooky walks in the woods around town, more to scare ourselves than each other when we come out bleeding from the deceptively soft-looking thorn bushes, while secretly hoping we would run into some of those wannabe-gang-related-clowns so we could actually have a use for these underloved metal bats. This year though we picked a random cemetery off the map by sliding one of those rosewood Ouija things around a bit and figured we would poke around for a while.

It was around 10 when I picked Marcy up and told her the plan. I left out the part of how exactly we picked this particular cemetery, but she still isn't too thrilled about the whole idea. I've known she's a superstitious gal since we started dating, but it's times like these I'm starting to regret enlightening her into giving up the "patriarchal shackles of her repressive organized religion" since she channeled all that blind faith into ghosts and demons and shit she can't quite define instead. I much preferred when she thought I was a literal angel sent down from God to deliver her from her own self-destruction over the newer theories.

"C'mon Marc. I know the graves are scary and all, but so far nothing in our lives has given us even a hint of supernatural shit."

"Yeah, and that hasn't stopped you from constantly looking, and you have NO idea what you are going to find..." That was her real issue. Something about opening the gateway, I think, was the issue last year.

"I mean, it can't be that bad. We're respectful of the dead—you know it. It's not like we're gonna defile the graves or anything."

"That all well and good for the police, not for the dead."

"You know what I mean. Even if there were spirits chilling around on their timestamped rocks, I don't think they are gonna have any beef with us walking around. We aren't even going off the path because, like, stepping on them would be rude as shit."

"I'm not going in, and you aren't changing my mind."

"Baby, pleeeeeease. It's not as much fun without you—being the only one with a date is my favorite part, and who's gonna hold my hand?"

"Skeletons. Spooky scary ones. Just go."

"Babe."

"Don't 'babe' me. I said no."

"I will fight the skeletons for you. You got nothing to be scared of. I can protect you!"

"No, you CAN'T! This is what I mean—that's the problem. You can't win against the spirits."

"Says who? Don't be scared honey, darling. I'm here—"

"I'm not afraid of the cemetery. I'm afraid of you. You don't know what you're messing with"

"Neither do you!" I laugh. I don't mean to laugh, but I do, that kind of restrained laugh with a sick desperate wish that it never came out, so instead comes out slightly maniacal and perfect to prove her point.

"You think you can just win if you find something. So you welcome it. You CRAVE it. You would invite a demon right into your soul just to see if it exists or not."

"So what? So what if I'm inviting them in? You really think I would ever hurt you? Demon or not, I would keep myself by sheer force of will. I wouldn't let it hurt you."

"That's not how it works! You want to be possessed so you can steal demonic power for yourself, or something, and it's just going to consume you—"

"You don't know how it works either! Why are you so confident I—"

"You wouldn't be you anymore! You wouldn't exist!"

"Oh fuck that—whatever I'm off to find a ghost. Have fun in the car."

I probably shouldn't have snapped at her, but always standing between me and mystery, plus the constant criticism 24/7, can get to be pretty lousy. I manage to find the crew by the rusted gates, looking to me expectantly.

"Hey! Glad you could make it man, really." They say the same shit every year.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." Same nervous laughter. Probably wondering why Marcy isn't with me. For some reason everyone is looking at my hands in my pockets, but I've got no weapons in them to show tonight so I just try to ignore it. We walk around for a while, making jokes about dumb names on tombstones and puns about skeletons. I sort of lead the pack, walking in front and guiding our adventure into mysteries unknown, until Bobbi comes up behind me and taps me twice on the arm.

"Hey, we're proud of you man."

"Proud of my directional aptitude, or my fearless leadership?" I get a hearty round of laughter out of them.

"We know it's been hard for you to come around, ya know, since..." Allie wraps an arm around mine, resting her hand lightly on my wrist, almost pushing it deeper into my pocket.

"But it's clear you're doing better every year!"

"Ha? I get better at this? How so?" These weirdos always have something to harp on.

"Well, ya know. It's the first year since Marcy died that you didn't hold your hand out all night."



ARTWORK BY ADAM INZALACO

